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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 002267

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)  
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: METHODIST ARCHBISHOP TOUTS OBASANJO --  
THE PRESIDENT WILL WIN!

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason 1.5 (B)  
and (D).

1. Summary: (C) During a July 5 meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Methodist Archbishop Sunday Mbang felt Obasanjo was performing well and would win reelection. One of Nigeria's most influential clerics, Mbang attributed much of the criticism levied at the President to Obasanjo's clamping down on corruption and politics as usual. Mbang predicted former Head of State Babangida would be attacked heavily by pro-democracy and human rights groups should he join the presidential race. Mbang also downplayed the Southeast's clamor for an Igbo President as premature, believing the Igbos have not yet been fully rehabilitated politically since the end of the Biafran civil war. Co-chairman of the Inter-Religious Council, Mbang asserted the Council had successfully prevented communal violence in many areas and that the group would focus more attention on discouraging electoral violence. End Summary

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NIGERIAN POLITICS -- A MURKY GAME  
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2. (C) During a July 5 visit with Ambassador Jeter at AmConsul Lagos, Archbishop Mbang stated he had predicted the political situation would be tumultuous because of the gross overreacting and overreaching by civilian politicians were out of control because they lacked responsibility. Civilian politicians were engaged in a no-holds barred contest to gain office or to keep it. Mbang recalled recently walking into the VIP lounge in the Abuja airport, the lounge crowded with politicians and government officials. Taking advantage of this impromptu and captive congregation, Mbang gave the briefest of sermonettes culminating with his asking the group why they sought or held public office. Still tongues and evasive eyes were the collective reply, he said. The cause of Nigeria's current muddle was that its political class was absorbed by an ideology of self-interest, not the collective good, Mbang stressed.

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OBASANJO BETTER THAN THE REST  
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3. (C) Mbang believed Obasanjo was performing well given the dysfunctional system he inherited and the strong resistance of politicians to meaningful reform. He cited liberalization of the telecom sector, road construction, slow but steady progress improving the electrical grid, and the fight against corruption as real, albeit still unfinished, Obasanjo accomplishments. Mbang believed Obasanjo deserved four more years to complete his work and consolidate democracy. Moreover, most educated Nigerians felt the same way. However, Mbang acknowledged Obasanjo was having serious problems in his own party to the extent that recapturing the party nomination was not certain. Many of Obasanjo's own Cabinet Ministers have been heard muttering that "Baba has to go, he does not let us chop." (Chop is local slang for engaging in corrupt practices.)

4. (C) Drawing attention to the electoral map, Mbang stated:

-- Northwest: Obasanjo would lose here because the region's leadership was angered the President had closed the spigot, stifling avenues of corruption and cut them off from accustomed but unlawful revenue.

--Northeast: Retaining Vice President Atiku as his running mate would help Obasanjo win the Northeast and adjoining areas.

--Middle Belt: Most Christians in this zone would support Obasanjo. Mbang mentioned receiving a delegation of influential Middle Belt and Northern Christians who backed Obasanjo, stating he needed four more years to consolidate democracy. An unknown question is whether Vice President Atiku's close ties to the populous Tiv would secure significant Tiv support notwithstanding last October's massacre of civilians in Benue State by army soldiers.

--Southeast: Mbang thought this region still might vote for Obasanjo, the determining factor being who emerged as Obasanjo's chief opponent.

-- South-South: Support hinged on resolution of the oil revenue allocation issue. Mbang felt Obasanjo has made headway judging from recent positive comments by Awka Ibom Governor Victor Attah whose state was the most adversely affected by the Supreme Court ruling on the oil revenue.

--Southwest: Will vote for Obasanjo en masse, Mbang believed.

15. (C) The Archbishop thought former Head of State Babangida (IBB) would be reluctant to run. Babangida erred by failing to appear before the Oputa Panel, Nigeria's Truth & Reconciliation Commission that looked into past military governments' human rights practices. IBB compounded the mistake by seeking a court injunction against government implementation of the Panel's recommendations for a criminal investigation into the unsolved murder of journalist Dele Giwa which happened during Babangida's tenure. IBB's attempts to stymie the investigation confirmed suspicions of him held by many Nigerians. If Babangida thrusts himself into the contest, Mbang said that he will be hounded by questions about Giwa and other human rights abuses that IBB would rather not have to answer. Regarding the other Northern former military Head of State seeking the presidency, Muhammadu Buhari, Mbang discounted him as a religious chauvinist whose appeal was strictly limited to the North.

16. (C) The Archbishop contended that attempts by the President's foes to field a Southeast/Northwest Presidential ticket would not reach fruition. The Southeast has not been fully rehabilitated politically, he claimed. People in many other parts of the country would suspect that an Igbo would use the Presidency to unjustly enrich his region or as a platform for succession. Moreover, he doubted that a credible Northerner would play second fiddle to an Igbo President. Flipping the ticket to a Northwest/Southeast combination would still pose problems, Mbang indicated. Most other sections of the country would rail against the return of national leadership to the Northwest after only four years.

17. (C) The Archbishop implied the high political anxiety Nigeria was experiencing was because the outcome of the election would determine the balance of power between Nigeria's geopolitical regions for years to come. He claimed the North looked askance at INEC's voter registration plans and was petrified by the proposal to implement a national identification card. The North has inflated its population for years but with the use of photographic identification opportunities to cheat would be reduced. Mbang also noted the North was not as monolithic as in past; more people were beginning to think independently, breaking the grip of traditional rulers and the political elite. The Arewa Consultative Forum, which has vociferously opposed Obasanjo and the national identity card, was attempting to maintain the old order but would fail, he believed.

18. (C) Regarding the military, Mbang said the Oputa Panel did the country a great service by exposing the military's dirty linen for all to see. Not only has the gloss disappeared, but the military has been placed in a very bad light. With its stature diminished, the military would be very hesitant to return to politics.

19. (C) Co-Chairman of the Council along with the Sultan of Sokoto, Mbang emphasized that the group was working well. The Council was the brainchild of Obasanjo's pastor, Reverend Yusuf Obaje. Formed in response to growing communal violence, the Council's purpose is to promote understanding and tolerance. He noted that the Council had developed an early warning system, alerting members to areas of tension in the country. This enabled the group to engage in preventive diplomacy that has defused many potentially violent situations. Mbang stated that many religious clashes could be avoided but for the baseness of local politicians who used religion to garner support, particularly in the North. He recalled the Council stepping in to cool a hot situation when a local government chairman in Kano tried to demolish a church although the structure had a proper building permit.

110. (C) Mbang refuted conventional wisdom that religion was at the root of most of Nigeria's communal violence. More often, the violence was due to fighting over scarce local resources or local political power between different ethnic groups. The rival ethnic groups sometimes tend to be predominantly of different religions. When this occurs, outside observers resort to the facile explanation of "religious violence" to describe what essentially is localized economic or political competition.

111. (C) Given the increasing electoral violence, Mbang said the Inter-Religious Council will devote more attention to the problem of elections as the campaign season progresses. While acknowledging that more violence and confusion are in the offing, he was optimistic that Nigeria would "muddle through." Mbang cited the Abacha years as a blessing in disguise. Although the political game in Nigeria has few rules, politicians now realize how far they can go before reaching the edge.

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COMMENT  
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112. (C) Mbang is clearly a man of conscience; that conscience is decidedly Christian and Southern in its outlook. For instance, he may be a little too dismissive of the traditional Northern elite as a spent force. Projection of his sense of individual morality on other Christians in the South may also lead him to believe that Babangida can be easily harnessed; a belief most other observers do not share. Nevertheless, Mbang is an astute observer of the scene and is well informed. His views reflect an important segment of thought among Southerners and Christians in Nigeria, and, because of his position and his personal stature, Mbang's view will also influence many Nigerians.

JETER